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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [BU](#)

SUBJECT: STRATEGY FOR EXPANDING BULGARIAN ENGAGEMENT IN
AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: DCM Alex Karagiannis for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Bulgaria has 470 soldiers in Afghanistan (up from 80 in 2006), most of whom are in Kandahar. The Bulgarians will add their first Operational Mentor and Liaison Team (OMLT), in cooperation with the Tennessee National Guard, to Kandahar in February 2009. Withdrawal of 152 troops from Iraq in December will allow Bulgaria to redirect additional assets to Afghanistan. Bulgaria has capacity for more OMLTs and a Role Two Military Medical Facility, as advocated by Embassy Sofia and NATO. With clear and concerted U.S. and NATO engagement, Bulgaria would likely agree to further new contributions or additional manpower to medical, military police or engineering units. We should approach the Bulgarians formally before the end of the year to avoid the political slowdown that will develop as next year's general election nears. End Summary.

CURRENT DEPLOYMENTS: FOCUSED IN RC-SOUTH

¶2. (C) In 2007, the Bulgarians deployed an additional 340 troops to Afghanistan to supplement the 80 already in place. The bulk of these forces guard the perimeter of Kandahar Airfield, while the remainder are embedded in international contingents in Kabul and Herat Provinces. A Bulgarian mechanized company and staff officers are embedded with the Italians in Eastern Kabul; a mechanized platoon is embedded with the Germans in Kabul; a five-person medical team is embedded with French hospital in Kabul; ten military doctors serve in two teams embedded in the Spanish Hospital in Herat; and two Bulgarian offices are serving with the Hungarian Provincial Reconstruction Team in Pol-e Khomri. Past support includes the provision of 70 personnel for Air Traffic Control at Kabul International Airport and donations of light weapons, ammunition and ancillary equipment to the Afghan National Army.

¶3. (C) In June 2008, Bulgaria approved the deployment of 0 additional troops to Kandahar Airfield to assume the Entry Control Point 4 mission, bringing it to its current total of 470. Starting in 2008, Bulgaria signed an agreement to train a dozen Afghan diplomats per year in Sofia. In February 2009, Bulgaria will send seven soldiers to participate in its first OMLT, along with six soldiers from the Tennessee National Guard (Bulgaria's state partner), who will be in command. The OMLT will utilize HMMWVs provided under the Coalition Solidarity Fund. After six months, it will be replaced by a second OMLT (with the same composition,) but under Bulgarian command. Future OMLTs will be entirely Bulgarian staffed. The Bulgarians have also offered to provide two MI-17 transport helicopters with crews to ISAF if NATO members pay for the extensive refurbishments necessary;

(we understand the UK has tentatively agreed.)

BULGARIAN FORCES: EFFECTIVE IN THE FIELD, THOUGH NOT FULLY UTILIZED

¶4. (C) American and allied commanders have praised the skill and professionalism of Bulgarian soldiers in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo and Bosnia. Bulgarian soldiers are capable, and in many instances, may be under-utilized (e.g., Special Forces personnel assigned to perimeter security missions, etc.) Bulgaria remains below NATO targets for deployable troops as a percentage of the whole as it is currently downsizing and professionalizing its Armed Forces. Despite this, it still retains a sizable pool of deployable forces, many with prior experience in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kosovo, Bosnia or peacekeeping missions in Africa. As a rule, Bulgarian soldiers are eager to participate in overseas operations and the General Staff always has more volunteers than slots to fill.

¶5. (C) While Bulgaria possesses capable forces, its soldiers have very little experience leading operations and its political leadership remains leery of sending troops into combat situations. (Bulgaria maintained combat troops in Iraq for almost three years sustaining 13 military KIAs, before switching to a perimeter security mission at Ashraf Refugee Camp.) Two Bulgarian soldiers were wounded in a rocket attack on Kandahar Airfield in early October 2008. This does not appear to have shaken the Bulgarian government's resolve to remain in Afghanistan in the slightest, but it will likely reinforce their preference to keep its troops "behind the wire." The government does not

impose caveats on its forces in Afghanistan, but it does adopt the caveats of any ally with whom its forces are embedded. This applies to its Kabul-based infantry contingents which mirror the limitations of the commanding Italian and German units.

RECOMMENDATIONS

¶6. (C) The President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Defense Minister have all strongly supported NATO operations in Afghanistan. We can turn this political support into practical, on-ground contributions by defining the most valuable specific contributions they can make. The more NATO the optic and operation, the easier for the government to make the strategic case to the public.

- Following two rotations of OMLTs partnered with Tennessee National Guard, Bulgaria should commit to fielding two Bulgarian-only OMLTs simultaneously starting in 2010.

- Bulgaria should provide a Role 2 Military Medical team in 2009 as recommended in the CJSOR.

- Although the 152 Bulgarian troops returning from Iraq in December 2008 cannot be directly reassigned overseas, the United States or NATO should propose a new Bulgarian mission in Afghanistan for roughly the same number of troops.

- U.S. and NATO should consider proposals for additional Bulgarian civilian-military contributions to Afghanistan, such as engineering or medical teams.

- Pending the outcome of the MI-17 refurbishment plan, Bulgaria should be approached to consider additional contributions of transport helicopters and crews.

¶7. (C) Comment: For a country of its size and GDP, Bulgaria's contributions to Afghanistan have been exceptional, but we believe Bulgaria can do still more. The Bulgarian military, both upper-level and the rank-and-file, are willing to be forward-leaning on new deployments that the U.S. or NATO suggests, but will not propose new ideas on their own. The Bulgarian political leadership wants to be

seen as reliable partners in international security, but will need time to socialize new deployment proposals among all government coalition partners. With elections on the horizon next year, we must move quickly to lay down a road map for more ambitious contributions for 2009.

McEldowney